

Thanks Be to God for James Galway

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Esther 7; Psalm 124; James 5: 13-20; Mark 9: 38-50

In my mind this homily is entitled “Thanks be to God for James Galway,” and I hope by the time it ends you will see why.

James Galway, the world-renowned flutist, was in town this past week for the opening of the Boston symphony season. During the week he was a feature on NPR. One of his interviewers asked him how he keeps a fresh approach to works that are favorites of audiences and orchestras; works he might play over and over as he moves from concert date to concert date around the world.

His reply was a charming analogy. He said it’s a little bit like learning to pray. When you are very little you are taught certain words, for example, the Lord’s prayer by your mother, who sees that you pray on your knees before bed each night. After a while, she sees you have learned the prayer thoroughly, and she tells you to add, “... and God bless Mummy and Daddy.” After doing that for some time you realize you can add something yourself, so you say, “God bless Mummy and Daddy and my dog.” And gradually as you go on praying, you realize you are free to add prayers for others, for friends in need and you can pray about world events and issues. All the time and every time, you are learning things about praying. Each encounter with prayer is an opportunity for new insights into praying.

The same is true, Galway said, for his relationship with favorite and frequently played concert works. Every encounter with them is an opportunity for new insights into playing, playing the music.

For me and for others I know, the same can be said for encounters with Bible passages. Every encounter is an opportunity for insight into the text in a fresh way. Often this is a matter of what one is living through at the time one returns to a given passage. A new measure of life experience added to the rich soup of the text can create a whole new menu of flavors and provide new insights into how the passage speaks to the present day.

That is very much the case for me with the gospel appointed for this morning. It has for years been a dreaded gospel passage. I feel as though I want to duck, when I see it coming at me. I feel as though I have had to deal with it far too many times. Until now. This time around I saw and heard it in a new way.

It is a collection of sayings of Jesus that Mark has compiled, part of a larger section in which Jesus struggles to help the disciples figure out and live out what it means to be a disciple. As you may remember the disciples in Mark are particularly dense, much more so than in other gospels. And Jesus has a huge job in trying to get through to them. Often he

employs his considerable talent for exaggeration for effect, hyperbole. And in today's passage he outdoes himself in my view when he swings into amputation language.

I always feel obliged, when the passage turns up for reading on a Sunday, to draw everyone's attention to the fact that Jesus doesn't literally mean what he is saying. Jesus is a healer of body, mind and spirit. He never, ever advocated self-mutilation, self-injury, or the severing of body parts as an act of faith. Jesus does not want us to injure ourselves. Our bodies are precious gifts from God and are to be cared for as such.

So what is he saying when he speaks these lurid images? And how might they speak to us this morning in Trinity Church, Boston?

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He's saying, "I, Jesus, expect you disciples to make choices that will keep the gospel – the good news of God's love that I bring to you – I expect you to make choices that will keep the gospel your primary focus - proclaiming it, living it, caring for it and handing it on from generation to generation. I, Jesus, expect you disciples to be faithful stewards of the community of the gospel, providing for the community's well-being in your generation and handing it down generation to generation. To do this you will need to make choices that will be excruciatingly painful at times. It could feel like amputation, as though you are losing a part of yourself. Indeed you may from time to time be called to the work of pruning, pruning your community, the work of making course corrections that could result in losing, pruning off a part of your communal self. If you turn away from the hard choices that will present themselves, you will lose your focus as a community, you will place obstacles in your own way and in the way of succeeding generations. You will tie a millstone around the neck of your community. You will lose your salt, to use two other images from this passage.

And how does this speak to us? In our particular corner of the household of God, Trinity Church, our Vestry and its officers have had to make some very painful choices over the summer months; choices necessary to bring our expenditures into realistic balance with our income; choices necessary in order to lower the draw we take on our endowment so that we might fulfill faithfully our obligation to future generations. These painful choices have resulted in the elimination of certain staff positions. They feel like amputation to many of us. The choices have nothing to do with the worth or the performance of the persons who occupied the positions. In fact, they are persons of great giftedness and faithfulness. Yet to some of us it all feels so personal. Provisions are being made to distribute the responsibilities of those positions among lay persons in the congregation, lay staff and clergy. And it feels as though there is a void, so anxiety rises. The choices have resulted in abundant opportunities for new patterns of mutual lay/clergy ministry - new and renewed ways of shoulder to shoulder ministry - and it's hard to leave the old ways behind.

One of my wisest teachers was fond of saying that the definition of mature faith is the ability to live with ambiguity. We don't have to like it; we don't have to seek it out; we just have to be able to live with it, tolerate it. Change spells ambiguity. We are called out

of one way to be on the way to something new, and so we dwell in ambiguity. God calls us out, always calls us out to journey toward the new things that in store for us. What we want to do is settle down.

Well, my friends, we are in the zone of ambiguity here as we live together day to day in this time of great change in our parish. In the midst of it all I hope that you will share with me deep gratitude to our Vestry, its officers and particularly our Treasurer and Senior Warden for grappling with a potentially very serious problem and starting us well on the way to its solution **before** a new rector walks through the door. These courageous disciples made the hard choices that faithful stewards of the household of God are called upon to make time and time again in Scripture. They could have turned away. They could have hung a millstone around the neck of the new rector. They did not.

I hope if you are sad (I am sad), or angry (I am not, but it's okay to be angry), or worried (I am no longer worried), you will not turn away. I hope you will turn to me or my clergy colleagues, to our leaders, to a trusted friend in Christ, a partner in ministry here in our corner of the household of God. Sisters and brothers in Christ hear each other out. We help each other on.

I hope on this Oktoberharvestfest Celebration Ministry Fair Sunday, you will come downstairs for all the fun immediately following the service. Look around you at all the exhibits of all the ministries that are available to you and that, taken together, weave the rich fabric of our life. Look around you; then, rejoice and be glad in the face of all the gifts God has given us.

Every Sunday as the procession starts up the aisle, I send off little prayer that goes approximately this way, "Thank you for blessing us by bringing us together in worship today and for blessing us in the days that have gone before and the days to come." Every Sunday it is a heartfelt prayer, because it arises from my experience, my experience of all the Sundays that have gone before and all the weekdays between the Sundays. Many times those days have been days of hard choices or sad happenings or dislocating change of one kind or another, but – looking back on them, they have – in the aggregate - been days of joy and wonder in all God's works. That will never change, because our God is the God of awesome and wondrous works.

So let us go on together, continue in the time we have together to pray and praise and celebrate and minister in our corner of the household of God, Trinity, and with God's help may we be ready, when we have to, to make the hard choices that face faithful stewards from time to time. Faithful stewards of our beloved Trinity Church.

If James Galway were in the congregation I would give him a big hug, for giving the interview and telling the story through which God has opened up to me this usually dreadful passage of Scripture. I hope you have had some new insights into it too. Amen.